U.S. Coddling of Mexico Ignores Its Scandals

By Andrew Reding

FORMER DEFENSE Secretary Caspar Weinberger is warning of a possible war with Mexico within the next 10 years. In his new book, “The Next War,” he suggests that narcotics cartels will dominate the corrupt government, driving tens of millions of Mexicans across the border. He says we should be prepared to invade Mexico and install a provisional new government there.

Granted, Weinberger’s argument is self-serving. As a former Pentagon chief, he is eager to promote larger defense appropriations in a post-Cold War world. Yet his portrayal of Mexico’s instability is a lot more accurate than the rosy prognosis of reform emanating from Washington.

Though Mexico has never stood out as a model of the rule of law, lawlessness has risen sharply in the last decade. According to the Mexican attorney general’s office, narcotics trafficking is bringing in an estimated $30 billion annually. That is more than four times the receipts from Mexico’s largest legal export to the United States—petroleum. Much of the drug revenue is, in turn, laundered through banking and tourism, so that even the “legitimate” sectors of the economy rely heavily on cash infusions from narcotics.

Washington has little reason to be candid about this. Two successive presidents—one a Republican, the other a Democrat—lobbied for the North American Free Trade Agreement by arguing that Mexico was undergoing reform. Their model “reformer”—former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari—is now in exile in Ireland. His brother, a close associate, is in jail on charges of conspiring to assassinate the incoming speaker of the Chamber of Deputies and spiriting hundreds of millions of dollars into foreign bank accounts under assumed names. While president, Salinas appointed key cabinet members known to have close ties to drug traffickers. Not surprisingly, it was during his incumbency that the cartels became ascendant.

Yet Washington continues to certify the absurd: that the Mexican government is cooperating in efforts to curtail drug smuggling. To do otherwise would expose the folly of our policy. So signs of danger are ignored. The Clinton administration now concedes that Salinas turned out badly. Yet it insists that his hand-picked successor, President Ernesto Zedillo, is the genuine article. Reform springs eternal among the spin controllers.

Never mind that Zedillo has yet to resolve any of the assassinations that have plagued the country since the drug cartels consolidated their control. Or that he backed out of a deal with opposition parties designed to ensure fair elections. Or that the only prominent drug smuggler he has placed under arrest had the misfortune of being linked to Raul Salinas, the jailed brother of the former president, who, of course, could no longer protect him. According to the spin controllers on both sides of the border, Zedillo’s noble intentions have been thwarted by his corrupt subordinates.
A close look at the record suggests otherwise. For more than three years, Brig. Gen. Francisco Gallardo has languished in a military prison cell on the outskirts of Mexico City. His crime? Calling for an ombudsman to investigate corruption in the armed forces. Mexican courts have found the 15 charges filed against him to be groundless. Yet Zedillo has refused to enforce the courts’ rulings, even after the Organization of American States’ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights asked him to do so two weeks ago. That refusal is all the more ominous following Zedillo’s decision to assign a primary role to the armed forces in the war on drugs.

Last July, the Tijuana regional director of the National Institute to Combat Drugs turned whistle-blower. Ricardo Cordero warned that Mexico’s top antidrug organization was so corrupt that his colleagues were acting as bodyguards for traffickers, escorting shipments to the U.S. border and misusing U.S. antidrug funds. Within days, the Zedillo administration arrested Cordero himself, charging him with the crimes he had denounced.

There can be no denying the obvious. Mexico’s continuing slide towards lawlessness originates in Los Pinos, the Mexican White House. Current policy in Washington is reinforcing the descent into chaos. Weinberger was right in cautioning that it could lead to disaster. Yet he is mistaken if he thinks bad foreign policy can be fixed by an invasion. That may have worked in 1914, but it won’t work today. The thought of sending troops into a country of more than 100 million inhabitants that shares a porous 2,000-mile border with us is utter folly.

That is why it is imperative that Washington re-examine its knee-jerk support for the longest-ruling autocracy in the hemisphere. The Clinton administration should stop certifying that Mexico is cooperating in the war on drugs until that becomes true. It should withhold military assistance until Zedillo orders the release of the general who wanted to clean up the armed forces. And it should withhold antidrug funds until Zedillo cracks down on corrupt officials who are protecting drug traffickers.

I cannot think of a more senseless policy than to underwrite a government whose corrupt practices are endangering our national security.

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